

Tradwives and truth warriors: Gender and nationalism in US white nationalist women's blogs

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Abstract

The language of white identitarian traditionalist women, or 'tradwives,' recontextualises white nationalism in the language of sexual politics. It creates images of the enemy other as a 'societal sodomiser' and of an idealised woman who represents and defends the threatened family and nation. These homophobic horror stories create deep affective investment in white nationalist nostalgia and subsume women's individuality to the image of the nation. White womanhood stands in for the national body under threat, allowing these tradwives to portray themselves as idealised whiteness, pseudo-subversive dissidents who reinforce the social order, and mother-protectors of the nation. Yet even the most arch-feminine performance of white womanhood need not be inextricably linked to nationalist imaginaries, enabling the possibility of a truly subversive femininity.

Dans cet article j'analyse la manière dont la famille, la sexualité et la nation sont opérationnalisées dans les blogs de deux 'tradwives' – femmes identitaires du Sud des États Unis. Le langage des 'tradwives' recontextualise le nationalisme blanc dans le langage de la politique sexuelle. Il crée des images de l'ennemi en

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tant que 'societal sodomizer' et des images d'une femme idéalisée qui représente la famille menacée et qui la défend. Ces histoires d'horreur homophobes créent un investissement affectif profond dans la nostalgie pour une nation blanche. Les tradwives subsument l'individualité des femmes à l'image de la nation. La féminité blanche prend la place du corps national menacé, permettant à ces tradwives de se présenter comme la femme idéale, des dissidentes pseudo-subversives et des mères protectrices. Pourtant, même la performance la plus archi-féminine de la féminité n'a pas besoin d'être liée aux imaginaires nationalistes, ce qui permet la possibilité d'une féminité véritablement subversive.

KEYWORDS: ANTI-FEMINISM, DISCOURSE-HISTORICAL APPROACH, FAR RIGHT, GENDER, SEXUALITY, SOCIAL MEDIA, WHITENESS

Introduction

Like something from a *Garden and Gun* conservative's fever dream, Southern belles defend the nation from homosexual, feminist, integrationist, communist totalitarianism by canning jam, wearing pearls and homeschooling. From King Kong to *Special Victims Unit*, rape trials to the Red Scare, the US far right reiterates long-held racist mythology in both popular culture and political discourse to imagine the nation as a woman under threat, an idealised national body whose purity must be protected. Their racist dog whistles and law-and-order lullabies idealise femininity as the incarnation of home and tradition, and mobilise women as momma grizzlies to fight for their cause.¹

White women are central characters in US nationalist discourses of whiteness under threat. Digital traditionalist women, or tradwives, are stars in a gendered narrative of the nation that positions them as both incarnating and defending national purity. Tradwives perform idealised femininity that represents the pure nation, tradition and family. In conspiratorial discourses on gender and sexuality, tradwives defend the national family from gay globalists and trans tyrants through a form of subversive submission to male authority.

Using the Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak 2019a), in this article I analyse how gender and sexuality are operationalised in textual and video blogs by two Southern, white identitarian tradwives. Tradwives advocate a 'traditional' lifestyle of submission to male authority, homemaking and homeschooling. Because they work at home (and so cannot be fired), tradwives present themselves as entitled – or even obligated – to speak the 'truth' in the fight for white nationalism and white children. Traditional womanhood is both something to be protected and an important element

in the fight against modernity, homosexuality, globalism and cultural Marxism.

There are multiple visions of traditionalist femininity within the white nationalist movement in the United States. Some represent an 1850s homestead, with images of women in fields of wheat; this image is so commonly used by members of the far right that 'wheat field' has come to mean a women's group (Squire 2018). Others idealise a pre-Christian tradition, such as Lana Lokteff and her Viking shield maidens (Mattheis 2018). Still others choose the antebellum South or use pearls and puffy skirts to evoke the 1950s before the advent of second-wave feminism and integration. Whatever visual tropes are chosen to represent tradition, all these women insist on their role defending their idea of a timeless, natural and traditional femininity from feminism and social decline.

In this study, I focus on two women: Becky Dillingham, known as Dissident Mama, and Lacey Lauren Clark, known as Lacey Lynn. Both are Southern housewives who advocate white identitarianism and nationalism. They advocate economic liberty and radical social conservatism, even to the extent of ending women's right to vote or outlawing homosexuality, to honour and elevate white manhood to its proper place at the head of the family and of the state. Lacey has 7000 YouTube followers and is a member of the American Identity Movement (formerly Identity Evropa), a hipster white nationalist group modelled on European Identitarian movements. Becky is linked to the neo-Confederate propagandist group Rebel Yell. Both groups are part of the broader sphere formerly called the US alt-right.

Dissident Mama and Lacey Lynn describe themselves primarily in terms of their relationships with men. Lacey's YouTube channel introduces her as: 'Traditional housewife and homeschooling mom of 2 cute little boys. Wife of the Aragorn to my Arwen, Ward to my June, the Alex to my Donna.' Her identity is summed up by her role as wife and mother, in the model of various conservative fantasies from television and film. Lacey is a conservative Texan married to a man she began dating at age 14, with whom she had two children before the age of 19. While she graduated from high school before marrying, she did not attend college, nor does she encourage other women to attend. Becky defines herself as a 'Truth warrior, Jesus follower, wife and boymom'. In her blog *Dissident Mama*, she interviews academic slavery apologists, politicians and members of the far right. A graduate of University of Wisconsin-Madison, she gave up her former journalism career to become a homeschooling mom and wife of a man active in the far-right group Virginia Defense League (although she lives in North Carolina). Both women use the language of home, femininity and family to revalorise white manhood (Kelly 2018) and call for a white nation (Mattheis 2018).

The language employed by trad women creates *Feindbilder* (Wodak 2020), images of the enemy other that have long been discursively characterized as destroyers of home and family (what Wodak terms a *Familienzerstörer*), as well as idealized images of home, family and nation threatened by destructive enemies (Rheindorf and Wodak 2019). Using a Discourse-Historical Approach, I connect these blogs to earlier narratives of traditional and threatened femininity, and ask how both women characterise femininity and family, how they characterise the enemy other and how these characterisations repeat tropes from earlier far-right discourses. This approach analyses the characterisations and arguments in a text while emphasising not only the discursive but the political and historical context. Importantly, the historical approach allows me to connect contemporary heteronormative and 'traditionalist' media to earlier, more explicitly misogynist, racist and homophobic discourses. I use this method to show how the characterisations of fragile women and their enemies in these blogs repeat tropes with origins in Southern segregationist rape myths. This permits us to challenge the assumption that the tradwives are merely defending post-war gender roles or domesticity, highlighting the white male supremacy and deep heteropatriarchy in their blogs.

White nationalist women's language

Wodak (2001) and Rheindorf and Wodak (2019) analyse right-wing populist discourses. Many other recent works use linguistic anthropology to understand the pro-white semiotics of Trump and other right-wing speakers (Hall, Goldstein and Ingram 2016; Goldstein and Hall 2017; Stolee and Caton 2018; Donzelli and Bugden 2019; Greene 2019; Hodges 2019; Mazzarella 2019; Slotta 2019; McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020). However, fewer scholars have specifically explored white nationalist women's language.

White nationalist women perform far-right sexual politics using the conventions of women's language – that is, language that directly or indirectly indexes traits, qualities and activities culturally associated with women (Lakoff 1973; Ochs 1992). Because these features are associated with a lack of social power, Hall (1995) characterizes stereotypical women's language as *submissive speech*. Women may perform submissive speech for male pleasure, as in Hall's study, or to naturalise the gender binary and heterosexuality (Cameron and Kulick 2003). Appropriate performance of women's speech is also linked to moral purity (Shankar 2008) and to cultural purity and lost tradition (Inoue 2004). White nationalist women then carefully use these characteristics of feminine, submissive speech to create a white nationalist nostalgia.

White nationalist nostalgia draws on discourses of women as mothers and mothers of the nation. Angelic femininity and motherhood have long been central signifiers in nationalist discourses, with the white woman's body becoming a metonym for the nation. From the earliest days of settler colonialism, woman was the 'mother of the republic' and the 'lady bountiful,' an angelic white woman coloniser (Meiners 2002). This subsequently became Victorian maternalism as the 'angels of the home' worked for social welfare and the 'angel of the classroom' acculturated immigrants (Nickerson 2012).

The ideal gender role also draws on the antebellum US South's 'cult of true womanhood,' which stressed a vision of women as innocent, domestic and childlike, placed on a pedestal and too pure for the masculine world (Coontz 1988). White nationalists encode white supremacy in an idealised gender role, a romance of domestic bliss or a rural idyll (Mattheis 2018; Maurantonio 2019). The pure, submissive Southern belle, the 'southern magnolia' (McPherson 2003), is always constructed in opposition to a Black other (Ferber 1999); the vision of the Southern belle came to figure prominently in the rape myths that supported segregation and racial terror (Dorr 2004).

Rape myths link idealised white femininity to the maintenance of the racial order in the South. Rape myths were the social construction of the 'black beast rapist' (Dorr 2004; Sommerville 2004): the strong, hypersexual, violent, powerful Black man whose animalistic sexuality threatened the fragile middle class white woman. Black men were described as particularly desiring white women, who were always innocent victims (Dorr 2000). Rape myths served to police the segregated social order by framing any contact between a Black man and a white woman as sexual, and therefore grounds for lynching and judicial murder (Dorr 2004). The rape myth connects the rape of white women with the figurative rape of white civilisation. These myths persist in interracial pornography – which, as Kosse (2022) lucidly demonstrates in her analysis of alt-right uses of the term *cuck*, shapes far-right conspiracies of the great replacement and the discursive weapons they aim at ethno-racial and religious others.

Tradwives draw on images of threatened ideal womanhood that persist in films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Steel Magnolias* (1989), wherein Southern belles remain an image of romance and femininity that erases Black women (Cox 2003). Similarly, nostalgic television repeats a 1950s ideal and encodes conservative values and gender roles (Dwyer 2015). Popular television shows such as *Law and Order SVU* also use the white, fragile, innocent middle-class woman as the dominant victim in their series – with real effects on our judicial system (Boehnke 2014).

Contemporary tradwives draw on an earlier generation of anti-feminist women activists and media personalities who took up the themes of threatened femininity from these rape myths and recoded them in new forms of conservative discourse. Phyllis Schlafly used ideals of domesticity in her activism against the Equal Rights Amendment, famously offering bread to lawmakers with the line ‘from the breadmakers to the breadwinners’ (Critchlow 2005). With her ‘Stop Taking Our Privileges’ (STOP) campaign, Schlafly mobilised a discourse of ‘defence’ of tradition against what she termed ‘radical’ feminism (but which was the liberal feminism of the Equal Rights Act). This discussion of threatened domesticity – and women as its defenders – would then be taken up by other ‘conservative feminists’ such as Marabel Morgan, whose marriage manuals defended housewives from changing social and sexual mores, and Anita Bryant, who wanted to defend ‘family values’ from homosexuality (Johnson 2019). Tradwives borrow this dual framing, describing themselves as both the threatened woman and the ‘momma bear’ defending her family.

From Phyllis Schlafly to Patricia McCloskey,² images of pure patriotic mothers and what Trump referred to as ‘suburban lifestyle dreams’ threatened by mobs of Black protesters are key to conservative discourses. Frugal conservative housewives, threatened by dangerous dark others, remain pivotal representational and legitimisation strategies for the right. In my analysis, I trace these images in identitarian and anti-homosexual blog posts and ask what role women play in contemporary white nationalist mythology.

Data and research ethics

Data for this article have been taken from my dissertation research on language, gender and education across the US white right. In addition to fieldwork in New Orleans, I collected data from 227 Instagram accounts and hashtags, nine YouTube channels, four Facebook groups and five digital homeschooling blogs or curricula over two years. Data were stored and coded in MaxQDA, a software that also allowed me to collect video comments and conduct keyword searches on Twitter and YouTube for #tradwife. I focus on two women, Lacey Lynn and Dissident Mama, as they had blogs that were centrally homophobic and anti-feminist. My analysis draws on seven of Lacey’s vlogs and five blog posts by Mama.

I followed strict rules to protect participants and avoid amplifying right-wing voices. All data are from public social media; for the current article, no private data or communication have been used, and IRB-approved consent was used for any contact in my broader research. Further, I was careful not to participate in either the monetisation (i.e. by subscribing to

a YouTube channel) or recirculation of right-wing images (i.e. by liking or sharing them on accounts used for research).

Social media ethnography (Postill and Pink 2012) begins with digital participant observation that draws on the ethnographer's own experiences as an internet user (Ryabovolova and Hemment 2020). I observed at least two hours of media per day and kept a daily journal of digital field notes that recorded entry-level and emergent themes, connections to other parts of my ethnography and my own experience, feelings and reactions. As a white woman from a conservative background, familiarity and visceral emotion shape my initial level interpretation.

To structure these interpretations, I draw on the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak 2001, 2020). Wodak describes DHA as an approach to studying a micropolitics of the far right, 'how they produce and reproduce their exclusionary politics in everyday politics, in the media' (2020:34). She argues (Wodak 2020) that far-right micropolitics is built on a homogenous vision of the nation, shared narratives of the past and traditional values, and an opposition to an elite; they displace difference within a population onto a conflict with an imagined other. These micropolitical elements are central to tradwives' discourses.

The DHA is characterised by an in-depth analysis of identity narratives (Wodak 2019a, 2019b, 2020) – the discourses that create homogenous people with a shared history and the enemy other onto whom all difference is displaced. Wodak (2019) characterises these identity narratives as *Feindbilder*, images of an enemy who threatens the social order. DHA emphasises the historical context and continuity of these narratives as well as the intertextuality and repetition of these images. In my study, one of the most central of these enemy images is the 'Black beast rapist' who threatens both the white woman and the white social order. *Feindbilder* also create the image of the pure, desirable and homogenous victim who must be protected; here, this is the delicate Southern white woman and the white nation.

Identity narratives are created through nominalisation and predication strategies that define and characterise the object of discourse. Nominalisation and predication strategies, often involving metaphor and metonym, are employed to construct identity and the other. I focus on metaphors of war, motherhood and tyranny. A nominalisation strategy might, for example, name women as mothers, and use metonyms such as 'wombs' for 'women,' or metaphors such as 'women as wombs of the race.' Metaphors can also create enemy images, such as when Becky describes the use of the metaphor of inverted fascism to characterise 'trans-totalitarians' and 'globohomo elite,' naming the enemy as a global elite, which she predicates as multicultural, homosexual and tyrannical.

Finally, I explore *topoi*, which are linguistic figures of legitimation – images that summarise an argumentative strategy or justify these identity narratives. In this article, I focus on *topoi* of nihilism and of inverted fascism. For example, in my data there exists a central *topos* of nihilism, which suggests that any progressive challenge to ‘traditional’ values is a slippery slope to nihilism. This legitimates the enemy image of gay rights advocates as family destroyers rather than advocates for other forms of family.

Findings

Trans-totalitarians and globohomo gangsters

Dissident Mama’s blog post ‘Societal Sodomizing’ opens with the *topos* of war, a legitimation strategy that characterises opposing ideas as threats that must be defeated.

(1)

This is war. I’m not peddling hyperbole here, folks. We are in the thick of it. Right now. Everywhere. There is no neutral ground. And the battlefields are primarily our children, our ‘Modern war often deals in abstractions’ writes Father Stephen Freeman. ‘Modernity is an efficient war machine’.

The post opens dramatically: ‘This is war’. The battle is shown in multiple predication strategies throughout the text: the reader is in ‘the thick of it’, in a place where ‘there is no neutral ground’. The sides in this war are defined through nominalisation strategies where ‘battlefields’ are children, faith and home – all traditionally feminine domains. This war is one where women are the central warriors. This is also a war of ‘abstractions’, not a physical war but a metaphorical battle for home and family, pitting the traditional woman against ‘modernity’. Modernity is variously named as postmodern religion, humanism or nihilism, and predicated as an enemy – as ‘a war machine’ in the excerpt above, and later in the text as a ‘truth destroyer’, a ‘nihilist arsenal’ and an ‘unceasing onslaught’ of ‘nihilist foot soldiers’ and ‘violent hordes’. The *topos* of war suggests that because homosexuality is part of modernity’s attack on the family, tradition and God, homophobia is actually self-defence.

As Dissident Mama continues her narration of the war of abstractions between tradition and modernity, she invokes the *topos* of nihilism:

(2)

And what drives our ceaseless enemy is nothing short of the apex of post-modern religiosity: nihilism. In other words, life has no purpose. Existence is meaningless. After all, the stem *nihil* is defined as ‘nothing’ in Latin. Thus, there is no inherent morality, and reality can be whatever you want it to be. Everything’s fluid. Facts and nature be damned.

The *topos* of nihilism connects all progressive movements from feminism to trans rights, welfare to racial equality in one single movement, which Mama calls 'nihilism' and Lacey Lynn refers to as a 'shadowy enemy', Cultural Marxism. In 'Paedophilia is Progress', Mama declares, 'All leftist movements, from BLM [Black Lives Matter] to LGBT ... share the same end goal: demolish the family, demolish God.' Both women argue that all social change is an attack on white manhood, on the patriarchal family and on God himself. Dissident Mama explains that by changing roles or searching for social equality, we place man where God should be and (post) modernity where tradition should be. Change is an attack on God, and therefore progressivism is nihilism. The *topoi* of war and nihilism together suggest LGBTQ+ rights are an attack on all that is holy, and any concession is defeat. Lacey Lynn constructs domestic ideals from old television shows but politicises them as lost and in need of violent defence. We might say, it's *Leave it to Beaver*³ or death.

The enemy in this war is characterised by the metaphor of inverted fascism, which suggests that those who seek equality and acceptance are the true fascists. It is inverted in that tolerance is rendered as authoritarian intolerance (of racism and homophobia). This is clearly shown in Figure 1, from Dissident Mama's blog.



Figure 1. From Dissident Mama's blog post 'Life with a Rainbow Mafioso'

The tradwives' enemy is named as the global genderfluid elite; the *Feindbilder* are the gay tyrant or the feminist cultural Marxist apparatchik. In this literal image of the enemy, the genderfluid man in pink is shown as Hitler, the picture of totalitarian evil. This is taken from a post where Dissident Mama describes her twelve-year-old trans nephew as a 'mafioso'.

Dissident Mama refers to her enemy as the 'trans-totalitarian' and frequently uses this metaphor of inverted fascism in a series of port-manteau terms: 'trans-totalitarian' is followed by 'globohomo gangsters'. 'Globohomo' here refers both to homosexuality and homogeneity, characterising gay rights activists as part of a global elite who want one world government and a single culture. She also frequently employs alliterative nominalisation and predication; any activists are 'progressive-puritans' and 'social-justice statist' – that is, part of a single, unified, powerful left who engage in cultural indoctrination, which she terms 'totalitarian tirades', 'progressive programming' and 'societal sodomizing'.

Dissident Mama's predication strategies emphasise the authoritarianism of the left and characterise her as the victim, as in the extract from 'Societal Sodomizing':

(3)

*Obergefell v. Hodges*⁴ was the turning point for gay tyrants, who were losing in the court of public opinion, so they turned to their apparatchiks in government. Sure, it totally makes sense to send out a freakin' SWAT team to arrest a peacefully protesting pastor and have snipers on the rooftop to keep an eye on those trouble-making family-values voters ... Welcome to Weimerica, y'all.

Here, Mama characterises those fighting for marriage equality as 'gay tyrants' supported by 'apparatchiks' – a term that suggests communist authoritarianism – who are using state power to violently silence 'family-values voters'. Dissident Mama characterises herself, in part through the use of the term 'y'all', as a brave Southerner defending her family against the forces of 'Weimerica'.

Lacey Lynn, in her video *Yes All Feminists*, similarly depicts the enemy as cultural Marxist elites who are attacking the family, but in her historical account the weapon was not marriage equality but rather women's equality. Lacey argues that women's legal personhood coincided with the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]) and was therefore an elite cultural Marxist plot to destroy the family and the white community. In 'Life with a Rainbow Mafioso', Dissident Mama also compares LGBTQ+ activism to the mob:

(4)

My children and I were recently subjected to the strong-arm tactics of the Rainbow Mafia, which shares many characteristics with the real-world mob. LGBT tyranny is coercive, powerful, debased, domineering, and greedy ... the Rainbow Mafia isn't in the shadows ... Rather, the globohomo gangsters want our minds, bodies, and souls, and without question.

Here, the enemy image is clearly developed; the nomination and predication of 'rainbow mafia' likens LGBTQ+ activists to a mob. She continues to describe them as criminals – 'globohomo gangsters' who rule our institutions and want power over all aspects of life. She concludes with another metaphor of inverted fascism: 'That's why I say the T in LGBT more aptly stands for "totalitarian"'

Finally, the war with modernity is characterised with a metaphor of sodomising; this is what Dissident Mama calls 'societal sodomizing'. She uses sexual assault to describe social change, indoctrination and power. As Kosse (2022) shows, pornographic imagery is central to far-right discourses of hate. This image of sexual deviance also recycles Southern rape myths, which used sex to construct a bestial, violent other and compared physical rape to a destruction of the social order. In the eponymous blog post, Dissident Mama describes societal sodomising first as the war on tradition, family and God, likening sexual acts to social destruction.

(5)

Either way, the consequence is the same: a deracinated culture brimming with atomized individuals. This kind of hopelessness makes for a pliable people, as well as individuals who are hungry for 'identity.' Trash family and God ... Destruction is the end goal. This societal sodomizing (as I like to call it) is pushed on a reconstructed populace who typically play nice but always, always get burned.

Dissident Mama compares the destruction of society, family and God to sodomy, making sex a metaphor for social and ideological destruction. She also uses, as is frequent in her work, references to the South; 'a reconstructed populace' refers to post-civil war racial equality imposed on the South. Metaphors of inverted fascism liken progressive social change to Northern occupation in an image that blends racism and homophobia. As the end nears, the sexualisation becomes more explicit and more violent:

(6)

And now, for some odd reason, the nihilists who foisted their worldview down the throats of unwilling Americans through judicial fiat now want special legal protections ... You won't spit, citizen! You must swallow and like every minute of it. Central authoritarians and their goons in the Fourth Estate will white-knight for the rainbow-huddled masses till you comply.

First, ideological tolerance is compared to forced oral sex. 'Foisted down the throats' suggests sex as it expresses the imposition of a worldview, something confirmed by the sexualised order 'you won't spit, citizen! You must swallow ...'

As the conclusion of the post nears, the sexual metaphors grow more explicit and more violent. The final part of Dissident Mama's post compares tolerance to forced anal sex. She says, comparing ideology to penetration, that tolerance is being told to 'bend over and take it'. That is, being told to accept others is like accepting social rape. She ends with a visceral, violent definition:

(7)

societal sodomizing: (verb) having nihilism shoved up our anuses so hard and so many times that we experience uncontrollable fecal leakage due to damaged bowels, and our rectums eventually prolapse, as is the case for many serial sodomites.

In the end, the attacks on tradition and family are compared to anal penetration. The reader is forced to endure these metaphorical rapes by the globohomo ghoul who is positioned as bestial, disgusting, violent and hypersexual through the characterisation of anal sex not as love or pleasure but as painful violence leading to bodily injury. Dissident Mama compares gay people with rapists who force nihilism upon others, and compares their social influence with bodily injury and contamination. Again, as in earlier rape myths that compared physical rape to the rape of the racial order, here sodomy is compared to the rape of the heterosexual order.

Subversive submission

The protector from the 'societal sodomizer' is the tradwife herself. In these discourses of threatened domesticity, she is both the ideal woman and the warrior who upholds and protects the family, home and hearth. She must always be submissive to men and remain in the home, but this is also framed as a subversive act, a defence of the nation. As Dissident Mama notes, the new battlefields are family and children. In an eponymous video, Lacy Lynn agrees: 'Community is the traditional woman's battle ground.'

The tradwife is characterised through interlocking nomination and predication strategies, the metonym of the womb and the metaphor of tradition. Put simply, she is trad(itional), and she is a wife and mother. The metonym of the womb defines women through and as her reproductive role: she is essentially her ability to have children, and this defines her difference from men, her position in the home and her desires. This is extended metaphorically to her role as wife of biblical 'vessels', including in one site termed 'biblical gender roles: find's gods purpose for your life in your gender' (Biblical Gender Roles 2021)

This role is also, very importantly, not just mother but wife – the counterpart, helpmeet and support to the white man. As in Figure 2, the thumbnail for Lacey Lynn's video *My Traditional Courtship Story*, the ideal woman is thin, white and submissive to the point of worship; her eyes are turned up at an imagined husband's hands clasped in prayer.



Figure 2. Title screen from Lacey Lynn's vlog *My Traditional Courtship Story*

One major role of the woman in this movement is to give white men back their sense of great importance, of having built and being at the centre of Western civilisation. Society no longer worships your man, so you should.

A tradwife also incarnates tradition. This means first and foremost that she remains in this biblical, biological, 'traditional gender role'. This can refer as well to an atavistic, naturalised tradition of female submission and domesticity, where blurred gender roles indicate a damaged modernity or nihilism, as in Dissident Mama's blogs. Tradition also refers in these discourses to cultural reproduction, as both Dissident Mama and Lacey Lynn point out in discussions of homeschooling. Women's discourses play an important role linking biological and cultural traditions within nationalist movements, in what Jensen (2005) describes as integralism. Traditionalism is a core element for identitarian politics, in whose imagination the nation had an idealised biocultural, racial past.

Linking womb and tradition, nationalist discourses extend this metaphor of motherhood to the mother of the homeland, as well as of the home. Taken to its extreme, this becomes the idea of the woman as mother of the white nation, like the white supremacist trope of the womb of the race (Ferber 2004). In white nationalist discourses, the *topos* of the family argues that the nation is built on (white) families. As Dissident Mama explains, nation comes from the word for ‘to be born.’ This is meant to prove that the nation is a family and a racial, biological connection – something the sexual Marxists wish to destroy.

This role is legitimated through the *topos* of subversion, which suggests that in a fallen, multicultural, modern world, tradition is the truest form of subversion. Because marriage equality is framed as trans-totalitarian, and feminists as cultural Marxists, traditional gender roles are countercultural and rebellious. The tradwife is not just a symbol of threatened domesticity, but also a warrior, a momma bear, who saves tradition through the performance of feminine duties.

The title illustration of Lacey Lynn’s video ‘Make Women Traditional Again’ (Figure 3) shows how this subversiveness is explicitly cultivated. A vintage illustration of the homemaker welcoming her husband is captioned ‘Against the Modern World.’ This references the title of Julius Evola’s (1995 [1934]) manifesto of traditionalism, a text popular with the alt-right and neofascists, while suggesting a woman at home is fighting modernity. This follows a common visual style among the tradwives, who will often post images of a home with the line ‘tradition is the highest form of rebellion.’



Figure 3. Title screen from Lacey Lynn’s vlog *Make Traditional Women Great Again*

This subversiveness allows the tradwives to characterise themselves with the metaphor of the ‘re-belle’. Lacey and Dissident Mama are Southern belles and Southern rebels, both fulfilling traditional standards of femininity and rebellious subversives. Perhaps Dissident Mama’s name says it all, characterising her as both a mother and an anti-communist free thinker. They are thin, pretty, submissive wives and mothers of sons, everything the Southern ‘cult of true womanhood’ would want; they are also dangerous countercultural ‘unreconstructed’ rebels against what Dissident Mama calls northern ‘progressive-puritans’ and ‘totalitarian-tyrants’, which aligns with the broader far right’s discursive positioning of racism as provocation or critical truth-telling (Tebaldi 2020). They do not claim to be fighting for white power; rather they are fighting against the narcissism and nihilism of the cultural Marxist modern world.

Yet, despite the air of antimodern subversion, a brief examination of the interdiscursivity employed in Lacey Lynn’s videos shows how media, advertising and dominant cultural discourses shape her white nationalist fairy tale. As Coontz (1992) explains, much of the US idealised family is the product of post-war television and advertising – more consumer culture than ‘tradition’. This is explicit in Lacey’s evocation of the 1950s (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Title screen from Lacey Lynn’s vlog *Pies Patriarchy & Pearls*

Lacey describes the 1950s with three signifiers: pearls, patriarchy and pies. These show affluence and traditional femininity, as illustrated by one of her favourite actresses, the perfectly submissive housewife Donna Reed from the classic Hollywood Christmas film *It’s a Wonderful Life*.⁵ Her references to the film index her belief that a pre-feminist suburbia is, in fact, wonderful. Reed also played a ‘loving wife and mother’ on *The Donna Reed Show*, a 1950s sitcom that Reed herself identified, according to Lacey, as not just a show but a true reflection of her persona. In any case, the old-fashioned wife played by Donna Reed in both the film and the sitcom resonates with Lacey’s ideal femininity and provides a nostalgic cover for her white nationalist views. Like other reruns of 1950s television, these shows portray an idyllic lost home out of place and time – not a real tradition, but the abstract idea of traditionalism. Lacey Lynn may

dream of Donna Reed, but she is evoking an ideal of feminine submission to support white supremacy. This is loudest in her early video, *The 1965 Red Pill*, where she explains that community and family were destroyed by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart-Celler Act), which ended racial quotas limiting non-white immigrants. The traditional family she performs links female submission indelibly to white nationalism.

A close analysis of the visual sequences from Lacey's video on trad life, or Trump's 'suburban lifestyle dream', shows how these consumer images are manipulated to create an image of ease, white utopia and feminine desire.

The title screen announces that this is a dearly wished for life, a dream come true (Figure 5). It shows a woman baking a sweet potato pie and vacuuming in heels in a recontextualisation of common 1950s advertising imagery. The pop culture imagery continues with a shot where the viewer opens the door to her husband while the voice of 1950s TV actress Barbara Billingsley says, 'Good evening.' In the next scene, Lacey appears to be the one at the door, aligning herself with this television ideal: the woman who knows her husband always knows best. She is also trying to position the viewer inside this ideal scene of joyfully welcoming a husband home.

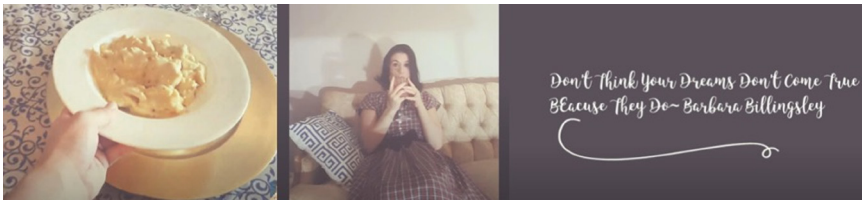


Figure 5. Screenshots from Lacey's video *Tradlife*

With the shot positioned so the viewer is aligned with her visually – and perhaps ideologically – Lynn serves her husband a traditional Southern dinner of chicken and dumplings in white gravy on gold-rimmed plates. Here again, the viewer is inside a 1950s trope (the woman serving her family) that could be taken from a Sears catalogue. We cut to a scene of her mischievously and girlishly sipping wine at the end of her workday, and the screen fades to a Barbara Billingsley quote about dreams coming true.

This is propaganda. However, there is no call for racial holy war, and no skinheads. Instead, Lacey is simply positioning the viewer within what she views as a magical traditional universe. Just as Lacey replaces her own life with the imaginary cinema, the world of the tradwives replaces women's individuality with the mythical construct of the subversively submissive helpmeet. This is a countercultural life of ease and loving white men. It is

a dream she wishes you to have – and believes you already do. At the end of her advice vlog, Lynn looks directly at the camera and says, ‘Don’t be afraid to admit you want to be a homemaker.’ Her gaze is earnest, and her implication is clear: if you have the courage to ignore the Marxists, you too could be this ideal white woman.

Discussion: From subversive submission to subversive femininity

White nationalists give white womanhood deep meaning. Dissident Mama and Lacey Lynn transliterate old racist myths into new forms, framing nationalism in the language of gender, sex and family. In this section, I first review the ways these two women invest femininity with meaning, and then I look at how this femininity can be recontextualised (Park and Bucholtz 2009) by leftists. Instead of pseudo-subversive submission, we see a more truly subversive femininity in the social media accounts *Queer Appalachia* and *Dixieland of the Proletariat*.

Dissident Mama and Lacey Lynn frame questions of social change, race, class and sexuality in terms of the gender binary and the patriarchal family. They use historically powerful narratives of racialised sexual threat to legitimate homophobic violence and exclusion. They recontextualise populist language so that elites are no longer economic or political but sexual; they are called ‘globohomo’, ‘feminist cultural Marxist’ or ‘modernist nihilist’. This makes cultural change an attack on the family and on the nation – a ‘sodomy’ of the social order much like the old rape myths. They draw on mid-century patriarchal idylls to represent a white nation with a soft glow of nostalgia, while their discourse implies that a return to gender roles will bring comfort and community back. All of this serves to soften and normalise, as virulent racist and homophobic politics become soft melodic visions of suburban affluence, love and ease.

This recontextualising of racism as sexual politics also locates women at the discursive and affective centre of the identitarian rebellion against the modern world. This transforms the role of ‘just’ a housewife into a mother of the nation, a symbol, a nurturer and a protector. They take on deep meaning in what Dissident Mama calls the ‘war of abstraction’, as embodiments of atavistic tradition, keepers of white suburban utopia and as the incarnation of true womanhood. They are also fighters for this tradition. Both Dissident Mama and Lacey Lynn describe children, family and community not only as a role but a battlefield. Much as Phyllis Schlafly characterised the fight against the ERA as a defence of privileges, the return to a traditional role is characterised as a defence of women. The tradwives go further and

suggest it is a subversion of dominant norms. Domesticity is more exciting and more meaningful when threatened by the 'trans-totalitarians'.

This is further demonstrated by the blogs' addressivity – the way they position the reader as aligned with them at the centre of this text and its moral universe. Becky places the reader at the centre of sexual mythology, threatened womanhood and mother-guardian. Lacey visually places the viewer inside her traditional role at the loving centre of the home. They create a character who is free thinking and rebellious, but who perfectly fulfils the social requirements of femininity. Then they suggest that the reader or viewer could also embody these dualities, the countercultural heart of the nation; you too can be a Dissident Mama. The project of white male redemption offers powerful social and psychological wages for white women as well.

However, tradwives are not the only recontextualisation of socially dominant forms of womanhood. Southern left-wing activists, in the digital media accounts named Dixieland of the Proletariat and Queer Appalachia, offer an alternative form of subversive femininity. They recontextualise images and norms of white womanhood, offering femininity a different meaning – one in support of queer and trans rights in a decolonial Southern United States.

Dixieland of the Proletariat, whose icon is a cotton boll with a Mao hat, is an Instagram account and podcast that teaches working-class Southern history. Offering an idea of traditional femininity beyond the Southern belle, they show beautiful women working on farms, conducting mutual aid, raising money for workers and fighting to return land to indigenous peoples. They also note that working women and radical women have a long history in the South, resisting the right-wing idea of the Southern belle as the real rebel. They offer new visions, as shown in Figure 6.

Queer Appalachia's Instagram accomplishes a similar goal with popular culture: it takes images of Southern culture and Southern white womanhood and gives them a new narrative that supports queer, trans, working-class Southerners who are Black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC). Queer Appalachia offers images of arch-femininity along with queer Southern love, and raises money for medical aid, housing and land for LGBTQ+ and BIPOC Southerners. They are known for their support of trans people who have lost housing or jobs as they transition, and for a 'sexy' mutual aid that sells sex toys to erase medical debt.



Figure 6. An Instagram post from *Dixieland of the Proletariat*

The account often uses Dolly Parton, the busty blonde country star and icon of Southern femininity (Figure 7). Dolly, with her rhinestone dresses and her hair 'teased to Jesus', is exaggeratedly feminine in a way that reveals the artifice and social construction of femininity itself. Dolly's femininity is a performance, not an abstraction or a metaphorical womb. Far from confirming gender essentialism or homophobia, Dolly's arch-femininity exposes artifice rather than naturalising gender norms. This gender fluidity is confirmed in the well-publicised story of her losing a lookalike contest to a drag queen (Aman 2021). From starring in *9 to 5* to her longstanding educational and labour activism, as well as her support of Black Lives Matter (Leimkuhler 2020),⁶ she offers an alternative way of being subversively feminine, protesting the police instead of blogging about the PC police.



Figure 7. An Instagram post from *Queer Appalachia* featuring Dolly Parton

Queer Appalachia and Dixieland of the Proletariat expand the idea of subversive Southernness. They succeed in resisting the essentialist vision of woman as an abstract symbol of domesticity by drawing on more regional, classed identities and multiple types of femininity: trans women on tractors, lesbians urinating on confederate flags and angry anarchist grandmas. They provide a very striking image of Southern tradition and domestic work, but reframe it against the police and for BLM.

These histories and images locate a truly traditional, subversive, white femininity at the centre of a radical left movement. They tell a history of a radical working class, a diverse community that contests white nostalgia for a timeless, placeless home inhabited by a characterless white angel. This Southern subversiveness also challenges liberal arrogance and classism (as the tradwives may not be wholly off base when they employ the term

‘puritanical-progressive’). Instead of a traditionalist idyll, lost causes and mint juleps, the radical left evokes a decolonising imaginary made from afrofuturism, possums and vibrators.

These images challenge the far-right reappropriation of subversion used by the tradwives to renew ideas of submission or make white heteropatriarchy sexy again. They contest the portrayals of the left as censorious PC police or new tyrants. They also offer a new fairy tale of sex and sexuality in support of freedom and mutual aid that invests femininity with new possibilities divorced from these metaphors of womb and national family.

Conclusion

Lacey Lynn and Dissident Mama construct the idealised traditional white woman, family and nation in their online social media. They use this not only to normalise white nationalism, but to make far-right politics seem both ideal and subversive. These women operate from within existing female roles; they embody the mommy vlogger and the momma bear protecting her family. They use feminine discourses of home and family, as well as Southern rape myths and panics over hypersexual social others, to create a fairy-tale romance out of white male supremacy.

Gender is seen as a site of investment in conservative politics and forms of personhood. These nationalist discourses link homophobia and racism to desirable forms of femininity, heroic motherhood and the subversive yet ideal traditional wife, who is threatened by cultural Marxists and trans-totalitarians. Future research might explore how these themes of threatened femininity and subversive submission appear in other media, such as conspiracy narratives or homesteading and traditional health, which may continue to help explain women’s uptake of far-right beliefs.

Trad femininity is neither natural nor atavistic tradition, and this vision of womanhood is not uncontested. Dixieland of the Proletariat and Queer Appalachia, among others, use ludic, joyful language to link images of white femininity, such as big blonde hair, or icons of the US South, such as the restaurant chain Waffle House, to a different politics: Black Lives Matter, decolonization and queer mutual aid. Their discourses challenge nationalist, naturalised motherhood, resignifying high femininity as part of a radical tradition. Taking their lead, engaged researchers might go beyond those editorials that ask, puzzled, why white women voted for Trump. Instead, a closer look at white nationalist women’s language can show how femininity is deeply bound up in conservatism. The analysis of the link between femininity and conservatism does not just reveal how mainstream motherhood becomes the Trumpian ‘suburban lifestyle dream’; it may also help us to move towards more progressive forms of femininity that exist beyond it.

About the author

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Notes

- 1 This opening narrative contains a number of references to elements of conservative American popular culture: *Garden and Gun* is a magazine, ‘belles’ refers to wealthy Southern women, ‘King Kong’ refers to the popular film but also to the media’s perpetuation of racist images of sexual violence also seen in *Special Victims Unit*, a popular TV show about sex crimes. ‘Momma grizzly’ is a term used by former presidential candidate Sarah Palin to describe her law and order politics.
- 2 Patricia McCloskey is the wealthy St Louis housewife who drew a gun on Black Lives Matter protesters and was subsequently, along with her husband Mark, invited to speak at the 2020 Republican National Convention.
- 3 Tradwife Lacey Lynn constructs her images of a lost idyllic tradition around white family norms such as those in the show *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963), which celebrate male authority and loving, submissive mothers, all surrounded by postwar suburban affluence.
- 4 *Obergefell v. Hodges* is the Supreme Court decision that permitted same-sex marriage in the United States.
- 5 The film *It’s a Wonderful Life* was played every year at Christmas on US American network TV in Lacey’s (and my) childhood and is considered a symbol of choosing family and community over personal fulfilment.
- 6 Dolly Parton recently voiced her support of Black Lives Matter. She has long been an advocate for her community, from sponsoring children’s reading programs and initiatives to improve graduation rates in Tennessee, to paying residents of her hometown a UBI (universal basic income) during natural disasters and donating a million dollars to Covid-19 research.

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